

Spotlight On

# CANADA

## 'MTV Magic' Rubbing Off On MuchMusic Network

### MUSIC VIDEO SERVICE LIFTS FINANCIAL SPIRITS OF INDUSTRY AS COUNTRY TUNES IN

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But the workers here are too busy to pay much attention to the decor. Busy and happy. Except that at the MuchMusic Network, upstairs in the downtown studios of a feisty sister tv station, business takes precedence over bold displays of joy.

One day, everyone will be able to sit back, sign and put feet on the desks. Not now. This is the cutting edge and there's no time for complacency. Not yet, anyway.

But maybe sooner than everyone thinks. It was only last April that MuchMusic was given a license as a national music video pay television service on cable on the basis of a cautious, viable business plan—about 200,000 subscribers in the first year, modest advertising revenue, modest program expenditures.

Frankly, all hell has broken loose since then. A good kind of hell, too. By the end of 1984, only four months after its debut, MuchMusic had eclipsed the half-million mark in paying subscribers—the first Canadian pay tv service to do so. MuchMusic general manager Dennis Fitz-Gerald said advertising was far ahead of even the most optimistic estimates of only months earlier.

Guffaws ricocheted across the room late in 1984 at the annual shareholder's meeting of CHUM Ltd., the well-heeled broadcast firm which owns MuchMusic, when company chief

Allan Waters confidently predicted profit by the end of Year One.

To hear MuchMusic president Moses Znaimer tell his tale—and he relishes success, so be prepared—this success story is the culmination of years and years and years of hard work. Znaimer helped pioneer music video programming in the pre-MTV days at CITY-TV, the independent television station he founded and later sold to CHUM, which now shares the dank Queen Street facilities with MuchMusic.

CITY's The New Music remains a Canadian syndicated tv success and the station was programming several hours of music video and magazine tv when it came last year to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission for a license.

It faced stiff competition from a joint bid by Rogers Radio Broadcasting Ltd. and Molson's Breweries Ltd. How tough is Rogers in a fight? For years its CFTR-AM rock station pecked away at the Toronto stranglehold on the youth market by CHUM's flagship Toronto station. For three consecutive books now, CFTR has been ahead. CHUM takes Rogers seriously.

The wearings in Hull, Quebec, lasted weeks and CHUM was often the target of some nasty charges. But, in the end, the CRTC went with CHUM's experience over a more ambitious, but chancy, Rogers bid. Asked if he thought he'd be in the position of launching a successful entity from the first day on the air, Znaimer says with uncharacteristic restraint: "Yes."

If Znaimer is the brains behind MuchMusic, programming vice-president John Martin is the soul. Or, is it the other way around? In any event, it is Martin's clever graft of long-honed skills from conventional broadcasting to ever-new music vid-

eo territory which as given MuchMusic an immediately identifiable look, style and feel—high-tech, but highly accessible.

MuchMusic only programs six hours daily. Its package is then repeated three more times to complete the 24-hour schedule. Such a format applies considerable limitation on playlists, but the specialty programming channel still has an exceptionally wide selection. Martin is the final arbiter on what is usually a playlist bursting at the seams. Take, for example, the range of material on the week of Jan. 5. In high rotation was a largely predictable assortment of AOR attractions, but beneath that in medium rotation were some improbable candidates for mass exposure in Canada: the Dazz Band and Malcolm McLaren, two artists who won't make many, if any, radio charts nationwide. And the week's adds included Whodini and Eva Everything, acts with no national record distribution.

Everything's video came courtesy, roughly speaking, of MuchMusic. Part of its license stipulates that \$100,000 or 2.4% of its gross revenues will be put into an independent video production fund, administered largely without MuchMusic influence, to stimulate Canadian video creativity.

Although criticized as too meager to make a significant impact, the Video Foundation To Assist Canadian Talent (VideoFACT) is at least \$100,000 more than would have otherwise been available. Other sponsors are coming aboard to augment the fund.

"I saw Eva's video on MuchMusic and I'm thinking of signing her," says Larry McCrae, a&r director of Quality Records. "I think anything that fund produces has to be paid attention to."

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Videos got some unsolicited attention from other quarters in 1984 in Canada. The Ontario Censor Board, a provincial body which usually sets the pace for the rest of the country's censors, began reviewing videoclips last April. By the fall, it had found its first two objectionable ones: "Relax" and "Two Tribes" by Frankie Goes To Hollywood.

The board has no power over broadcasting, but it can restrict their access in such places as taverns, high schools and institutions. Frankie goes to the cutting room. Sanitized versions were submitted and got the go-ahead from the board.

The issues of sex and violence in video got considerable treatment at the CRTC hearings, where MuchMusic promised to behave, Martin played down the issues, but they caught public attention and couldn't be disregarded.

On other fronts, both the federal and Ontario governments promised to get tougher on pornographic video with stricter laws that could pass this year.

For the music business, however, MuchMusic may turn out to be a mixed blessing. The exposure it is already giving artists is of immeasurable assistance.

But, as one a&r man put it: "It's putting greater pressure on us to make high-priced videos. No, MuchMusic isn't pressuring us; the artists are."

Most videos are foreign-produced, but Canadian firms



Bryan Adams with writing partner Jim Vallance at Rock Express national awards event (Photo: Jones Bowie).

have in the last two years entered the game, cautiously at first. There's no stopping in sight to the increases in video bankrolling, and if Canadian companies are complaining now, wait until producer Rob Quartly and others begin demanding big money.

Quartly, who took the first-ever Video Of The Year award at the Junos in 1984 for Corey Hart's "Sunglasses At Night," said he and his colleagues are largely underpaid in Canada. "The whole area needs more support."

Quartly's Champagne Productions emerged as the pre-eminent Canadian production house, but Doug Bennett (lead singer of Doug & The Slugs) also figures as a pivotal producer to watch. Several recording studios also added video facilities in the year, matching Le Studio's move in 1983 at Morin Heights, Que.

Hart and Toronto's Platinum Blonde were two artists for whom Quartly produced videos and they were clearly the two Canadian breakthroughs of the year.

Apart from them, the biggest new video celebrities were the MuchMusic on-air staffers, including J.D. Roberts, Christopher Ward and Mike Williams. Jeanne Beker contributes rock gossip, but MuchMusic hasn't yet found its female voice.

Meanwhile, the president of the Canadian Recording In-

dustry Assn. (CRIA) worries about video overexposure and an erosion of record sales if the situation isn't properly monitored. Brian Robertson admits there's no evidence yet of video exposure displacing record purchases, but it's "a very real possibility."

Martin disagrees, of course, and is happy to pull from the wall the first-ever platinum album given to the music video service—from Canadian heavy-metal band Helix, for contributing to sales.

As for video repetition, Martin and others at MuchMusic are looking this year to expand the programming day to 12 hours. That will allow much more flexibility.

There are also plans for a French-language service for the hungry Quebec market. While the private networks there program some music video, publicly-owned French CBC-TV refuses to broadcast any.

MuchMusic was late in entering the Quebec market as an English service, but cable companies were quick to tout the channel in other parts of the country as a major pay service. While they had been partly to blame for the troubled debut of pay tv in Canada one year earlier because of shabby marketing, they seemed better prepared for the second round, which included MuchMusic and The Sports Network.



Corey Hart (Photo: Jones Bowie)